

"Taka Iimura Interview,"
Charles Martinez and A.L. Rees

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Introduction

A month in Japan should be enough to report back fairly authoritatively on developments within independent film and video there, but many commitments allowed only a dilettante's approach to the subject. I managed to track down Taka Iimura in the labyrinthine streets of Tokyo. Japan, unlike the West, retains a peculiarly inefficient house referencing system. Street names are reserved for the larger freeways while the rest of the suburbs survive with a peculiar block reference system which is fine for blocks conforming to neat planning structures but anything else causes severe problems, especially for nonnative pedestrians like myself.

Taka was very helpful, not only within his own capacity as film/video artist but also because he seems to know virtually everyone within this particular field in Japan. Through him I met Mako Idemitsu [1] and between them both I managed to get a fairly accurate perspective on independent film and video in Japan.

Mako's own position within this field is that of active artist whose chief concerns are those of the oppressive influences (male/female) which effect women in the middle-classe Japanese socio/economic structure and also the dialectics of the conscious /unconscious mind as propounded by C.G.Jung. She tackles these concerns equally through film and video. One of the many films that I saw was *Shadows* part 1 (video, 1980, 28mins) which personifies the 'inner world' of the subconscious of woman/women (the protagonists) with the use of a filmed monitor within the camera frame, reflecting the shadows of the psychology of those women occupying the space around that monitor. *Shadow* part 2 (42min.) expands this concern further through the relationships of two housewives, two sisters, a wife and her husband's lover and a mother and her daughter. Mako, having spent 8 years in California, returned to Japan to re-evaluate the changing consciousness of women in a middle-class society, but both industry and the government continually discourage this form of progressive thought through failure to make available funds for artists whose concerns are other than purely commercial ones. Subsidised co-ops therefore do not exist and people like Mako survive through strong cooperation between individuals with similar ideals.

Without a co-operative system, the strength of pressure/political/art groups is clearly undermined. This may well conform to the political status quo but fortunately many galleries are willing to screen such work even though they too are under the same economic pressures. Seibu studio 200 is one such gallery which recently showed a selection of work by British artists, while Image Forum is the centre for film and video screenings in Tokyo. gallery 360 is where Taka had a screening in December 1982 and where we talked at length about this and other people's work.

Taka, who apart from showing his own work, has developed a reputation for promoting the work of contemporary Japanese artists by travelling with their work. He maintains, an active

interest in the work of most Japanese artists and gives them the opportunity to screen work internationally. His trip to England has presented the opportunity to interview him and hopefully to clear up some points in relation both to Charles Martinez and A.L. Rees.

[1] Christian names of women in Japan often end in KO while christian names of men often end in SHI.

AR: Can we talk firstly about your earlier work?

TI: Well, I don't remember exactly - my starting point? Let's go back more than ten years ago then. In High School I was involved in poetry, then in University I was more into the visual arts - Dada and Surrealism, and I wrote some poems. Then I saw that film was a mixture of poetry and painting. So, from the beginning I was interested not so much in dramatic narrative film but more poetic film. My first film was called Junk, made in 1962 just after I graduated from university. I began on standard 8. Junk was shot at Tokyo Bay where I filmed a lot of junk mostly industrial waste but some domestic too. There is someone picking up the garbage too. There are also kids in the film, fighting, playing around on the beach. But more generally, I would say that this belonged to the Neo-Dada movement and also junk art which I was influenced by at the time. We hadn't any avant-garde film in Japan then; it came in 1964 to 1965. I only had knowledge of it through books. That is something which fascinates me.

AR: It seems as if a lot of those ideas were from the West and America in particular.

TI: Yes, at the beginning it came from Europe and American underground film also - both arrived at the same time, and was first shown in the mid 60s.

AR: Looking back on that period now, do you see it as a problem, a conflict? Work was very international then, whereas today people are more conscious of nationalism, of the relationship of American culture to other culture. Is there any conflict there now or do you see it as you did then - an excitement at the parallels between countries?

TI: There is a cultural dimension and background as well as a political one. The films I made were traditional avantgarde ones, and in time I grew up to absorb more of Western culture - it is the education system too. It is nothing unusual for young Japanese to look to the West for something new. The more traditional thing comes later. The traditional is left behind in youth but you become more conscious of it when you go abroad. When I look back at that time, there was much conflict between Japan and America. I participated too in demonstrations against the American military treaty, so I am politically more to the Left but not necessarily so in cultural terms. I don't see these two things as necessarily connected. There is another factor. After the war Japan tried to have a kind of modernism as against traditional Japanese values. The American occupation after the war brought much corruption but it also brought much Western culture. Even the Communist Party was liberated. It was after the Korean War in the 1950 that there was anti-American feelings and this wasn't necessarily from the Left alone.

AR: You now spend your time between America and Japan, when did that begin?

TI: Well, I spent more than ten years in the States, therefore I think I should try more in Japan. Since I feel that one's life is limited I want to put more energy into Japan.

AR: Do you find any difference in the reception of your work between American and Japanese audiences?

TI: Not necessarily. When you see a certain piece you sometimes cannot tell where it is from unless certain traditional cliches and symbols are involved. The view is very international often even if the motivation behind a work is not. There is a difference in attitude between Japanese and other audiences, although this applies to art in general and not only film. The Japanese are more reserved and don't react immediately unlike American audiences that do and quite openly too. It doesn't mean that the Japanese are not interested in the work, they simply react differently.

CM: Could you give us some idea of the state of independent film in Japan? For example, there was a major film group in Tokyo in the 70s that collapsed in the mid 70s.

TI: That group was called the Japanese Film-makers' Co-op. I wasn't in Japan at the time, but started in the late 60s and lasted one or two years until the early 70s. As far as I know through friends and that I've read, it didn't work because of internal problems. There is a cinematheque and sporadic screenings in Tokyo when film-makers get together or for one man show in what space is available. Around the mid 70s Image Forum was formed run by two guys who handle showings, distribution and workshop. It's not really a co-op. There is no government subsidy so they have to manage with the money they take at screenings and through the workshop. It's rather hard for them to keep going. At university level there are about five course teaching experimental film - not many compared with Europe. Some museums and City halls show films. But it's not just film but also modern art in general that there's no government support. Only in the traditional arts such as Kabuki, and the Noh or craft or for showing abroad is there support.

AR: In the West, film-makers and video-makers are quite separate, they see themselves usually as either one or the other. Do you see your video work in relation to avant-garde film, or do you see that you're doing as perhaps moving across different areas of interest and not necessarily confined to film? Is video very different for you?

TI: Not necessarily. Video and film are different media. Both have the advantages particular to them, but they are also media for presenting the moving image, so I don't necessarily distinguish between them. I regard myself as an artist who happens to make film and video whichever is right for the idea I have.

CM: You have been showing a selection of your work here recently. Can I ask about the film Line A,B,C,D,E which I noted was made in 1972 but revised by you in 1980, could you explain the significance of this revision?

TI: That particular film was made in 1972 as a silent film but never released. As far as I can remember the structure was only ABC. The modification was E which meant return to the beginning, otherwise the structure is the same. In this case, I am using the positive negative dialectic of the film - a line A then B which is negative. The timing is repeated then the order is reversed, so that it is negative positive -repeat and reverse. It's also about time and the order - you have black or clear space - the idea being that time cannot be reversed or repeated, perhaps repeated but not reverse as time is ongoing - in a sense, fictional.

AR: All your work that I've seen, as in the one you've just described, has a structure that's already there when you begin work on the film, Do you think working on a film changes its meaning?

TI: The films I made in the 60s are very loosely structured with no script. Then in the late 60s to the early 70s I made a text beforehand and they were more rigidly structured and concerned with time and duration. I try and use a different aspect of time as an idea defined in advance, although it doesn't mean that's how it works when it's shown. The idea on paper and what is realised is not the same. There is always something else which can be realised in real time and that is why I make the film. That kind of film I made for ten years between 1968 and 1978. Then I changed style. The films I showed here Talking in New York and Talking Picture the structure is very different from that in my 70s' films.

AR: Could you say more about the change as many people don't know your early work so well?

TI: One difference is the image. My early films have images but usually of line or black space or white space or sometimes numerals, but not photography. Now my films have a photographed image and sync sound when I talk directly to camera. Two years ago when I showed the two later films, they told me I was cracked because I've begun to use the image again.

CM: But are the problems the same except now you include an image?

TI: It's not really included, the image is what I am talking. It's not the same problem, I have sort of extended that concern into theatrical space where the film deals with the problematic of the audience. That is the structure of the film rather than the structure within the film frame, which has been done in the 70s - what you call structural film. In some case there is performance as well so that the audience relates less to me and more to me as the speaker presenting what I am showing. So there is a certain structure and how to define that in language as well as image is what I try to do. Sometimes it provokes an audience and they react strongly or become irritated, at other times, they find it funny--the discrepancy between me and the image of myself. So I perform a double role like I did yesterday when I showed the film. There was a white frame without any film projected, myself, a live person, you see my shadow and the video image of me next to the screen. There are three levels of me--me, the shadow, and the image.

AR: Some structural film-makers have modified their work recently as the result of a rethinking and now use actors, narrative or some dramatic element. Do you feel that is a direction you might be drawn to?

TI: I don't see myself going that way. I am still interested in narrative forms of film. Of course, the individual film-maker has that kind of freedom. For myself, there may still be room to explore the narrative format - I don't deny that. What particularly interests me is sound - my talk, and what is recorded and the various recording devices e.g. sync sound. I have experimented most in this areas with video but also film where there is a direct address of myself in film. The film Talking in New York in which I quoted from Jacques Derrida's book on Phenomenology, I just repeat the sentence 'I hear myself at the same time that I speak', although I modify this sentence to 'I speak to myself at the same time that I hear' connecting both sentences using 'that', so completing the cycle. I did it both in Japanese and English and the structure of the languages are different, a fact that I'm interested in. In English the film is synchronised and you can switch over to the Japanese. I also realised that what Derrida said in the book is not the same when you read it. It's not identical the 'I' who hears and the 'I' who speaks in the media. There is a split between them. The word doesn't happen at the same time as I speak, as I hear myself. So I alienate myself from the reality where I speak. The one who speaks is in the picture and the one who doesn't speak isn't in the picture. So when I show myself in front of the camera you will identify through either the visual or the auditory, and you will have a different entity - of sound or image. And there is this discrepancy this split.

AR: That's interesting I would have thought you would have seen more of a continuum in terms of film between the image which is materially made up and the sound track which is also materially made up. Although they strike us a very different--we hear a sound track we see a picture its all going on technically within the same strip--the discussion here seems to suggest that you see much more of a break between the levels of speech and the sound that comes from the sound track.

TI: All narrative film is a manipulation of this track. Like Mifune talking in English where you see what he is really saying in Japanese but you see it on TV in English which is a quite different thing.

CM: You use film or video to make a particular kind of statement or make a particular type of analysis and the reactions from the audience, as you were saying were fairly aggressive audience reaction in many cases audiences will leave your performances. Does this particularly concern you and don't you think that perhaps the statements that you do make should be made more palatable and reach a wider audience.

TI: It differs from one place to another so its difficult to generalise but it happens as you say. I try to make a clear statement. I still think a negative reaction is a good sign. It does not necessarily mean that it's a bad film if the audience walk out. It is the audience who realise the film. Like Duchamp said, the realised work is in the audience and that includes myself when I'm making film or when I've finished film or showing film. They are different stages yet the audience is involved in those stages and I try to relate myself to the audiences because it's part of me. So I'm not that egocentric that I don't care about the audience and just do what I want

although you never know in advance what the reaction will be. It certainly concerns me how they respond or not, yet I have no control over that so when this woman leaves then it happens. I am not above the audience. In my last piece I did not only show the film, but tried in a way to involve the audience reaction and show myself.